



## New Perspectives in African Cinema: An Interview with Cheick Oumar Sissoko

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preface to her intercutting between the two women during the body of the narrative.

8. Ironically, some films I've heard used as examples of purely political, nonsensual film-making (e.g., Laura Mulvey and Peter

Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Jackie Reynal's *Deux Fois*, and Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who . . .*), have always struck me as visually sensual, and in fact seem more and more visually pleasurable as time passes.

MANTHIA DIAWARA AND ELIZABETH ROBINSON

# New Perspectives in African Cinema: An Interview with Cheick Oumar Sissoko

**Sissoko is the director of *Nyamanton* (The Garbage Boys), made in Mali in 1986 and regarded by many as a significant turning point in African cinema. The text of the interview derives from a radio program directed by Elizabeth Robinson.**

*Nyamanton* is the most recent in a series of important historical developments in African cinema. Independent African cinema was born in Senegal in 1963 with Sembene Ousmane's *Borom Sarret*. Then in 1968 Sembene's *The Money Order* made history because, for the first time, Africans were speaking African languages on film. In 1973, *Touki-Bouki* by Djibril Diop Mambéty, also of Senegal, entered history as the first African avant-garde film. In *Ceddo* (1977) Sembene was internationally acclaimed for the manner in which he made innovations in film language by using the griot or storyteller as the center of narrative agency. In 1983, *Finye* (*The Wind*), by Souleymane Cissé of Mali, won the top prizes at Ouagadougou and Carthage—the two most important film festivals in Africa—for unprecedented cinematic depiction of current situations including student strikes and military dictatorship.

*Nyamanton* is another landmark in the development of African cinema because it links the politics of film production with the aesthetics of African cinema in a new way. Bearing first politics in mind, one must realize that 80% of films in Sub-Saharan Africa are coproduced by the French government. Under this condition,

the film-maker's crew, the equipment of production and post-production are all from France. Most of the time, only the director and the actors are Africans. It is not hard to understand why France wants to be the biggest producer of African films. Film production enters in the politics of the transfer of technology which France needs to monopolize in Francophone Africa to maintain its post-colonial presence. In addition, the Francophone countries constitute an important economic market for France. If a film-maker turns to Japan or the United States for technological assistance, then an entrepreneur dealing with refrigerators, too, might look for an alternative supplier outside France. From one area to another, the economic leverage of France might be undermined. In the case of film, the consequences would be far-reaching—as far as Paris. The French technicians and the equipment that used to participate in the production of African films would be unemployed. In Francophone Africa, the almost omnipresent French films at the movie theaters might gradually decrease and be replaced by other foreign or domestic films.

*Nyamanton* is the first African film to go against France's techno-paternalism. Sissoko

used a Malian crew and the equipment at the Centre National de Production Cinématographique (CNPC) of Mali. Before him, African directors preferred French cameramen on the ground that they were more experienced. Of course, France only financed films on the condition that French technicians be employed. Sissoko, by avoiding these traps, was able to produce his film at a reduced cost of \$20,000, compared to the average African feature film produced by France which costs \$150,000. The film was edited in Yugoslavia under a Yugoslav-Malian arrangement established since 1964, but only used previously in the post-production of documentary films. The French and English subtitles were done in Athens, Greece, a place much cheaper than Paris. Only the making of new prints is handled in France, by a private business. Thus Sissoko proves the point with *Nyamanton* that films can be made in Africa with African technicians and the equipment that exists in Africa, and at a reduced cost which is not detrimental to their quality.

To turn now to aesthetic issues in African cinema, Sissoko's breakthrough has been in the addition of comedic laughter and melodramatic tears to the didactic messages that already existed in African films. Before *Nyamanton*, the film-makers' commitment to social change was translated in the films by a negation of imperialist and neocolonialist instincts, and an affirmation of a dignified and revolutionary image of Africans. The film language, whether one looks at it from the point of view of the camera angles, the framing, the editing, the *mise-en-scène*, the sound or the characterization, was intellectual; it connoted rather than denoted. The ironic laughter of satire and the serious tears of tragedy were preferred to the "playful" modes of comedy and melodrama.

Sissoko, on the contrary, betrays the intellectual in favor of the popular in *Nyamanton*. The film tells its story with little respect for clean camera lenses or smooth editing; it uses often uneven sound levels and incomplete subtitles. While this violence to film language undoubtedly has the power to make some formalists feel uneasy, it does not distract spectators from the story. Once the narrative is well established, viewers automatically correct the rough edges for fear of being left behind by the narrative flow. Some may even interpret the rough edges

in *Nyamanton* as comical, but insightful, statements about the relationship between form and content.

*Nyamanton* was the favorite film of the public at the Pan-African Film Festival of Ouagadougou. In Bamako (Mali), it broke the record of such blockbusters as *Rambo* and *Jaws*. In 15 days it was seen by well over 35,000 spectators and it had recouped its cost of production, including the blowing up of the 16mm original to 35mm and the cost of several prints. The children who play the leading roles have become famous in the city, and people laugh and quote to each other famous lines from their dialogue. A businessman, touched by their performance, gave \$400 to be shared between them. *Nyamanton* contains the same didactic messages as the films of Souleymane Cissé and Sembene, but Sissoko communicates better with wider audiences by restoring play and laughter to African cinema. The irony, of course, is that Sissoko, who studied film at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in the 1970s, with semioticians like Christian Metz, eschews intellectualism in favor of a more populist style than that of other African film-makers.

Sissoko knew that he would encounter problems distributing his film outside of Mali because it was not coproduced with France, and could not, therefore, enjoy the same promotional advantages as other African films. Usually, when France coproduces African films, it places them in festivals, invites the press to see them, and sometimes distributes them in Paris theaters and on French television. On the other hand, films produced in Africa outside of the French circuit do not make it. Paris is the passport for international recognition for African films. Sissoko challenged the state of things again by struggling to show his film at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. When *Nyamanton* was shown at Edinburgh it was screened at 1 am, using a workprint, and the subtitles were in French. But the 60 or so people who were in the theater stayed to the end of the film and applauded Sissoko. Of course the reaction was not the same as the one in Bamako. Not knowing Bambara (the language of Mali spoken in the film) or French, the Edinburgh viewers missed the humor, but they were impressed by the well-made story, the acting of the children, and the images of a country caught by surprise while it was being choked by

NYAMANTON:  
The  
"garbage  
boys"



contradictions and dead ends. The film was selected for inclusion at the London festival, the San Francisco festival, and other festivals in Italy and Germany. On his way back to Mali, Sissoko stopped in Paris and organized a press screening. To their credit, Frenchmen like Jean Rouch and Louis Marcorelles loved *Nyamanton*. Rouch even proposed it for the prestigious Georges Sadoul Prize. As for Marcorelles, he arranged for the film to participate in the Mannheim festival where it won the gold medal for foreign entries. However, at the French screening, people criticized Sissoko for "sloppy" mixing, "out-of-synch" editing and "bad" framing. The officials of the French government went so far as to propose a financial grant for remixing and re-editing the film so that it would have a better chance of being distributed in France. Sissoko, of course, rejected their proposition, arguing that he was looking forward to the financing of his next film. When *Nyamanton* was later shown in London, it was very well received. In San Francisco, it was among the five most popular films of the festival.

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*Perhaps you could begin by describing a bit of the film for us? Just a brief story-line. . . .*

The theme of this film concerns Malian society in particular, but actually, it refers in a certain measure to all the social problems that poor families run into in African societies and

in Third World societies, and even indeed in industrialized societies. It is about the children of a poor family who observe a society in which they as well as their parents are struck by the social injustice and the lack of education. So it's a movie which denounces aspects of this society by the use of truculent scenes as well as dramatic scenes.

*There is one scene in the film that you said inspired you to write the rest of the story. We are referring to the moment in the film when children are first seen carrying their school desks from home to the school.*

These are scenes that at the end of the twentieth century are a drama for the human race. Every morning these children have to carry benches on their heads while going to school, carry them back home in the evening and start the process again every day. In the story, I make them go to school in the morning and in the afternoon they have to work in order to help their families make ends meet because their purchasing power is ridiculous.

*Tell us just a bit more about these conditions. Presumably not only the children but the country is impoverished to the point that very basic needs are not provided for. You made a choice in this film not simply to document these conditions but to dramatize them. Tell us how your contribution fits into the African cinema more generally. Is this a departure from the cinema of your predecessors?*

The need to give African cinema the face of the cinematographic art, to tell a story while using the cinematographic art, becomes of a capital importance because in order to have a message go through, it has to be acceptable. It must be interesting to the people. The importance of cinema is that it is a medium which dazzles, which captivates and can strike a person. So, the goal of the film-maker is to strike people during the minutes the film lasts. He reaches his goal by toying with people's emotions, by triggering laughter, fear, or tears.

*Some of Sembene's films are certainly very dramatic in addition to documenting in the way you described the conditions in which people exist. Indeed some of them even ridicule the bourgeoisie and colonial and postcolonial Africa. But are we correct in assuming that compared to Nyamanton, those films enjoyed relatively less success in Africa?*

Sembene hasn't made a film in ten years. But his first films, which were very successful, were made in 1963 and 1968. I'm referring to *Borom Sarret* and *The Money Order*. The media have since developed in Africa, enabling *Nyamanton* to be known more quickly than Sembene's films. However, the difference between *Nyamanton* and Sembene's most successful movie, *The Money Order*, is that *Nyamanton* is about the conditions of living, the denunciation of a policy from the perspective of the disadvantaged. Both films are about social problems but the difference lies in that *The Money Order* is the look of an intellectual. The same goes for Souleymane Cissé who shows our societies without trying to show the paralyzing effects our social problems have on the poor—whereas *Nyamanton* shows society through the eyes of the poor, stressing the paralysis and the unacceptable situation. My aim is to awaken the masses. So *Nyamanton* tries to show the social dynamic whereas *The Money Order* is an individual case, not really linked to most people's lives, to the social relations of society. That's why the people of Africa have called *Nyamanton* "our movie."

*When film became a popular entertainment in this country and perhaps elsewhere in the West as well, it was marketed as the poor or the working people's entertainment and it seems that this is an interesting parallel because the point of the entertainment was a distraction in early American films. So it was something to*

*keep the masses preoccupied. But what you're saying, is equally something for the masses of people but something which gives them voice rather than distracts them.*

I tried to set it straight that the goal of *Nyamanton* is the awakening of consciousness by explaining to the population that their misery, the fact that they are exploited, is not due to fatalism nor to Allah's will. It's due to the social relations of exploitation existing in that society, to the fact that a minority is exploiting them. I try to explain in the film that they can solve their problems by defending their rights, which are the rights of a majority.

*Let us talk more about the sort of mission that you see in film-making. Nyamanton won seven awards at the Pan-African Film Festival in Ouagadougou, and four awards at the Carthage Film Festival. With these festivals now being regularly held in different parts of Africa, and supported by international organizations such as UNESCO and the Organization of African Unity, what role do you see film playing in very broad terms both politically and socially as well as a communications and entertainment medium?*

When I went to Stanford University to talk about my film, somebody asked exactly the same question. Let me try to elaborate on what I said there. If you look at Africa today and at the rate of literacy, film becomes a very useful tool. That is, if you make a film which is accessible to people, they can see the images and they have the sound and therefore you can basically tell them what you want to tell them. Whereas if you write, if you use the media by using French for example, in Mali, or English in Nigeria, or if you write in the newspaper in English or French, people basically pick it up and throw it away. So film in that sense has become an essential tool in Africa. Culturally also, film becomes this tool which enables Africans to describe themselves, to create images of themselves and also to correct the image of Africa as produced by Hollywood and colonial literature. So film is doing that but more than that, film is also bringing out the cultural unity of Africans. I was a guest lecturer in Professor Teshome Gabriel's class at UCLA and there was a Nigerian student and he referred to a scene in the film between young kids and their grandmother. He said that is exactly the way it is in Nigeria too. So in that sense, through one

film, you see how African countries are seeing their common cultural heritage and I may add black American and the universal cultures because if people see what is happening in Africa, then maybe people will relate to each other in more human terms.

I'd like to add that I made this film after looking at the situation of Africa which put an end to the colonial period only twenty-five years ago. That is to say that at the time of independence, African masses had been made and were left backward, illiterate. Too many of our governments want to go on maintaining them in the same situation, want to keep maintaining our culture at the periphery of the world. It's true that if one dominates someone else culturally, one manages more easily to maintain that person in a state of economic dependence. So of course, linking the cinematographic art to life, to the social problems, is a necessity for us because there are many problems to solve in Africa. Unfortunately, film is only a little contribution to this undertaking. However, its importance is not negligible.

*Can you talk about the difficulties and the facilities of film-making? Presumably one doesn't have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars, stopping city traffic, for example, as one does here. But the process of film production must be a very different one . . .*

The problem of cinematographic production for African film-makers is similar to having a splinter in the foot. The youth of African cinema and the lack of political willingness on the part of the African states have not encouraged the emergence of producers, of people who have money and who want to finance the movie industry. Finding some money to produce a film is tantamount to practicing witchcraft. After that, when one manages to find some money, technical problems occur and the post-production cannot take place in Africa. One has to go to Europe.

*Can you comment on the production of Nyamanton?*

The production of *Nyamanton* is a long story. Because it's a film of denunciation and because of the government, *Nyamanton* was made incognito. In order to get some money, we presented the script of a documentary film which was accepted by the National Center of Production and the Minister of Information. When they financed it, I presented the scenario



*Sembene Ousmane (left) and Cheick Oumar Cissoko at the Ougadougou Festival*

of a feature film to my crew, which was the idea of *Nyamanton*. We were given \$20,000 for the documentary. We had the equipment and the technicians at the National Center of Production. We looked for the actors by ourselves and agreed on some sacrifices since we had been given almost nothing for the shooting expenditures. The production of the 16mm was done with \$20,000. The actors were to be paid later on. The postproduction took place in Yugoslavia because that country has had an agreement of cooperation with Mali for 23 years. But the producer, a government employee who was unaware of the feature film, signed a contract with his counterpart in Yugoslavia to finish a 60-minute documentary film. The cost of the editing was taken out of the \$20,000 budget. When I arrived in Yugoslavia, I negotiated thirty more minutes with the director of the lab. This without the agreement of the producer in Mali because, according to him, I was supposed to finish a documentary film. Since the lab had seen the film and the chief editor liked it, he himself insisted with his boss to keep the thirty extra minutes. That's how the feature film was finished and the day it was shown, everybody was surprised because they were expecting something else. The production of films for many an African director is as difficult as that. That's why African film-makers make a movie every three or five years.

*Having produced the film and encountered all those difficulties brings us to the other question we wanted to ask you. And that has to do with the distribution of the film. Can you describe how films are distributed in places like Mali, West Africa, and how they are brought to*

*the attention of a broader audience. Presumably, some of the distribution problems have also been or are also being solved by some governments.*

It would be rather difficult to speak of improvement except in the consciousness which is necessary in order to solve this issue of distribution, because it is the second splinter in the filmmaker's foot. A good attempt was the creation of the International Consortium of Film Distribution between 14 African countries. This creation was due to the struggle of some filmmakers like Sembene Ousmane. But in this case also, the political willingness of the African states was again lacking. Sembene ran into problems of distribution in the world but also in his own country. Problems of world-wide distribution are due to the powerful foreign distribution companies, American as well as French. In 1968, a movie of the quality of *The Money Order* was equal to those shown everywhere in the world. It went against the argument that the African cinema was not mature,

was a cinema of amateurs. Very often, a distribution company will buy a very good African film so that it will disappear from the circuits and will not be shown in movie theaters. In his own country, Sembene ran into problems with Senghor (who was then president) because of his movie *Ceddo*, known worldwide. And this movie was not distributed in Senegal. And in other African countries, African films cannot be distributed for the same reason: because distribution companies rule the game. In the case of *Nyamanton*, as in the case of all films, we had to take our film "under our arm" and to bring it to the different countries which were asking for it. We had the luck that this movie was very strongly asked for. So the countries which have asked for it are about to receive it and it is currently being shown in the Ivory Coast in very good conditions. But the filmmaker still has to go to these different countries. He becomes a merchant after having been an artist. The distributor does not come to him. So this problem remains to be solved.

# Reviews

## THE STEPFATHER

Director: Joseph Ruben. Script: Donald E. Westlake. Producer: Jay Benson. Photography: John Lindley. Music: Patrick Moraz. New Century/Vista.

Can a commercial psychological thriller modeled after Hitchcock's *Psycho* offer a progressive reading for contemporary women? Can such a film draw upon the exploitative elements of the genre and simultaneously serve as a radical reformation of the same? *The Stepfather*, an independent production directed by Joseph Ruben, brings together many of the major themes current in recent horror films, especially anti-feminist sentiments circulating in contemporary popular culture. However, Ruben and screenwriter Donald E. Westlake resolve the generic conflicts in a new and important way.

The plot relies upon many of the character types and narrative moves which have become familiar to contemporary thriller audiences, dating back to John Carpenter's *Halloween*. This is hardly surprising when one notes that Ruben's previous credits include *The Pom Pom Girls* (1976), *Joyride* (1977), *Our Winning Season* (1978), and *Dreamscape* (1984). The story centers on Jerry Blake (Terry O'Quinn), who

having murdered his previous wife and children, is now remarried to a young widow, Susan (Shelley Hack), and is living in a quiet Seattle suburb where he sells real estate. Jerry and Susan seem the ideal couple. Only Susan's 16-year-old daughter Stephanie (Jill Schoelen) mars the image of the perfect family. Getting into one scrape after another, Stephanie not only has failed to come to terms with the loss of her real father, but she also detects something disturbing about her stepfather, which she confides to her therapist, Dr. Bondurant (Charles Lanyer).

Like other recent films, most specifically *Blue Velvet*, *The Stepfather* addresses the dark side of family life and small-town America. More unusual is the fact that the film takes a feminist position, foregrounding patriarchal power but positing the maternal order in opposition to the destructive elements of patriarchy.

Partway through the film, after an argument with Stephanie concerning the good-night kiss she gives her boyfriend, Jerry decides to rid himself of this family as he has done in the past "when they disappointed him." This leads to the dramatic climax—Jerry's assault on Susan and his prolonged attack on Stephanie. In the